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Here's a collection of songs, old and new, by and about airmen. Everyone who sings them is, at least for the moment, a fighter pilot—one of the jocks for whom we...

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Throw a Nickel On the Grass

By Lt. Col. George L. Weiss, USAF (Ret.)



IN CASE you think the fighter-pilot song was invented in *your* war, buddy, forget it. Those aeronautical (and some aeronauty) ditties have been around squadron bars a lot longer than you think. Some can be traced back more than fifty years, and survive almost intact today.

But wherever they came from, one thing is certain: lyrics cranked out by Tin Pan Alley never made the grade. The lyrics that did were put together by men dueling against red tri-planes, by kids on their way to "Big B," by retreads climbing toward MIG Alley, and by the latest breed of warriors who flew into "The Valley" and made it "Downtown." Believe it or not, there are even songs written by POWs.

But why call them fighter-pilot songs? Everyone sings them. Like the man said, "Being a fighter pilot is a state of mind." When the hour grows late and the dice get dull, and the drinks seem weaker—shucks, then *everybody's* a fighter pilot. So they sing fighter-pilot songs.

Sometimes it starts like this:

By the ring around his eyeball
You can tell a bombardier.
You can tell a bomber pilot
By the spread around his rear.
You can tell a navigator by
His sextants, maps, and such.
You can tell a fighter pilot—
But you cannot tell him much!

One thing you sure can't tell him is that his aircraft is a dog. He accepts criticism of his aircraft in song only—in one or two lines of pungent analysis. An example is this stanza from *Just Give Me Operations*.

Don't give me a P-39
With an engine that's mounted behind.
It will tumble and roll
And dig a deep hole—
Don't give me a P-39.

They have a cynical flavor of their own, these songs. Some, perhaps, are safety valves for men who cannot, or will not, speak of natural fears, but are able to sing of them.

Death, of course, is a taboo conversation subject. No one is going to risk a jinx by talking about death. But sing about it? You bet! That's socially acceptable.

Songs about death and fear fill literally pages of squadron songbooks. Why not? Singing is a kind of group therapy.

Dangerous to morale? Obviously not! Frank Luke, Billy Mitchell, and Captain Eddie all sang the same or similar lyrics. They roared them with the same gusto as the grandsons do fifty years later.

Many fighter-pilot songs put new words to popular tunes. *Wabash Cannon Ball*, *On Top of Old Smokey*, *Red River Valley*, and others have formed the musical background for dozens of variations, in many places, and in different wars.

Service songs are not entirely the property of the blue-suiters. The Army and Navy have them, too (or had them first, we should say).

In 1951, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur made his famous farewell address to the Congress, he quoted a line from one well-known barracks ballad:

Old soldiers never die—
They just fade away. . . .

Within a few days, pop singers were cashing in on a tune which, for the most part, they hadn't heard before. Pity! There were several more stanzas such as:

Old sailors never buy,
Never buy, never, buy.
Old sailors never buy—
They just sail away.

And this companion lyric:

Old pilots never fly,
Never fly, never fly.
Old pilots never fly—
They just draw their pay.

A classic is the one first called *Old 97*. The lyrics were written by Haywood S. Hansell, Jr., who later became an Air Force major general. General Hansell also wrote lyrics to such between-the-wars favorites as *Eight Bucks A Day* (is the pay) and one called *The Formation* ("Here's a health to the formation leader, a jolly good fellow is he"), both of which apparently have found eternal rest in retirees' footlockers.

But in the lyrics to *Old 97*, he struck pure fighter-pilot gold.

The variations of this song are infinite. Even so, each retains the basics of the original. Recall your own favorite version and compare it with General Hansell's original lyrics:

There were ninety-seven airplanes warming up on the apron,
And they didn't have room for more.
The first ninety-six were of new construction,
But the last was a DH-4.

She was old and decrepit and the fuselage was rotten,
And the wings were warped and bent,
And she sagged in the middle like a cow in a pasture,
A cow that was quite content.

She was old 97, and she had a fine record,
But she hadn't been flown that year,
And she creaked and groaned when they started the engine,
For she knew that her time was near.

A Second Lieutenant wandered into the office,
And he asked for a ship for two.
And they said, "Young man, we are very short of airplanes,
But we'll see what we can do.

"Now the first forty-seven are reserved for the Majors,
And the Captains have the next forty-nine,
But there's one more ship on the end of the apron,
The last ship upon the line."

He was headed for Dayton, and from there to Columbus,
And he had to make that flight,
So he said, "OK, if you'll give me a clearance,
I will get there sometime tonight."

Oh, he flew over Birmingham and north Alabama,
And the ceiling began to fall,
And the clouds closed down on the tops of the mountains,
And he couldn't see the ground at all.

He turned to the left and ran into a snow-storm,
And he turned back to the right,

And he turned around, the fog was behind him
And the mountains were all in sight.

He flew through the rain and he flew through the snowstorm
Till the light began to fail.
Then he found a railroad that was going his direction
And he said, "I'll get there by rail."

He flew down the valley and he dodged around the mountains,
And he kept that road in sight,
Till the rails disappeared through a tunnel in the mountains,
And he ended his last long flight.

There was old 97 with her nose in the mountain
And her wheels upon the track,
And the throttle was bent in the forward position,
But the engine was facing back.

L-A-D-I-E-S, listen to my story.
No matter how you yearn,
Never say harsh words to your aviator husband—
He may leave you and ne'er return.

It is hard to come up with a fighter-pilot song that evokes more memories than that one. An old-timer today is the jock who once sang:

They gave him his orders at old Itazuke,
Saying: "Bill, you're 'way behind time.
Take this safe hand mail in your war-weary '80
And put 'er in Nagoya on time."

But Bill didn't do so well either. In fact, only a few verses later his '80 did "three snap rolls" and . . .

He came roarin' down the bottom, doin' a million miles an hour
When the tip tanks came off with a scream
They found him in the wreck with his hand on the throttle,
Still flying the Tokyo beam.

Old 97 still prangs away. Today her home base in Pleiku, where a Captain Barker, or Parker (the tape is one of those that was dubbed too often), put new words and new life to the song. This is the way it sounded one memorable night in Vietnam:

There were ninety-seven airplanes lined up on the apron
As far as the eye could see.
Now the first ninety-six were of modern construction;
The last was an O-1E.

Well, a handsome young Captain stepped up to the ALO,
For FAC-ing was his line.
"Now if the first ninety-six belong to the Majors,
Old 97 is mine."

So he climbed into his Cessna, his carbine
beside him,
His rockets tucked snug beneath his wing,
When a cry came from the ground com-
mander,
"Charlie's got us in his ring."

(Chorus) Well, did he ever return? No, he
never returned,
And his fate is still unlearned.
He may lie forever in that Vietnam
jungle—
He's the FAC who never returned.

The ceiling was low and the rain was a-fallin'
The Birddog was pitchin' all about,
But he said to that soldier, "No sweat,
brother—
TAC air will get you out."

Soon the fighters arrived. They were F-100s.
They called down to our FAC.
He told them it was rough but to follow his
directions.
And this one they could hack.

Now Charlie didn't like the sound of that
Birddog,
And the bullets began to fly.
He said, "If that airman brings in those
fighters,
Then he is going to die." (Chorus)

Now the leader rolled in and he asked for the
target.
The FAC told him where to aim his guns.
With unerring eye, he smoked out Old Charlie,
Until he had 'em on the run.

Oh, the battle was hot and too much for
Charlie,
And the soldiers began to shout
"God bless you fighters for saving our asses
And driving those VC out."

But no one noticed the crippled Cessna
As he made his final bow,
But one of those bullets had found its target
And Charlie had kept his vow. (Chorus)

Vietnam, if nothing else, has become the
military songwriters' Mecca. Some, like Dick
Jonas, are professionals who can turn out their
own lyrics and original music. Still others are
just good amateurs who can produce a parody
on demand for a party.

Back in March 1966, when Maj. Bernie
Fisher rescued Maj. Dafford W. "Jump" Myers
at A Shau, an incident that earned Fisher the
Medal of Honor, a song, *Hobo 51* (Bernie's
call sign), became a popular ballad. It was
written for the party celebrating the rescue. The
author, unfortunately, was killed a few days
later after promising Fisher he would clean it
up. Fisher will hardly say "shucks" out loud
and "his" song was sprinkled with combat ver-
biage. It's sung to the tune of *The Wabash
Cannon Ball* and is sometimes called *The A
Shau Canyon Brawl*. The clean chorus went
like this:

Oh, listen to the small arms,
Hear the 20 mike-mike roar!
The A-1s are bouncin' off
The A Shau Valley floor.
Hear the mighty roar of engines
Hear that lonesome "Hobo" call.
We'll get "Jump" home to Mother
When the work's all done this fall.

How are such songs born? Here's how one
was written. During the early part of the war—
or about midway, depending on when you were
there—the Special Forces club near Bien Hoa
burned during a spirited party. The only item
saved was an olive-drab brassiere that had hung
over the bar.

The G.I.-issue bra was escorted by the Green
Berets to the Air Force club bar and, with a
properly noisy ceremony, installed there, "on
loan."

It seemed appropriate that a song com-
memorate the occasion, and in a few days one
appeared. Sung to the tune of a fitting ballad,
The Green Beret, it won instant approval as the
Ballad of the Green Brassiere. This is the way
it goes:

Put silver wings upon her stone
To let her know she's not alone.
We love the maid who's buried here,
The girl who wore . . .
The Green Brassiere.

Now let me tell you about this girl.
She's a true Vietnam pearl.
She wore a flower above her ear,
And on her chest . . .
The Green Brassiere.

A VC shell came from above,
Only left one thing to remind us of
This little girl we love so dear—
A slightly tattered . . .
Green Brassiere.

Put silver wings upon her stone
To let her know she's not alone.
We love the girl who's buried here,
The girl who wore . . .
The Green Brassiere.

The war in Southeast Asia seems to be a
shapeless mass to those who never got there.
Today sounds like yesterday and tomorrow
may be more of the same. But when you're
there, it just ain't so. There are benchmarks,
even if the bench is a private one. Words like
Plei Me, A Shau, and Khe Sanh are only
places. If you were there, they were *something
else*.

December 18, 1967, went down in many a
squadron's history as the day they fought the
Battle of Doumer Bridge. Naturally a song
came out of it. The music was *Joshua Fought
the Battle of Jericho*. It sounds great with a
male chorus (about one wing), at around 1:30
a.m., with lots of beer and no mission tomor-
row. The first four lines are also the chorus:

We fought the Battle of Doumer Bridge,
Doumer Bridge, Doumer Bridge.
We fought the Battle of Doumer Bridge,
And the bridge went tumblin' down.

Eighteen December, sixty-seven—
It seemed like a thunderclap.
We dropped Doumer Bridge on down
Into Ho Chi Minh's red lap. (Chorus)

Now you talk about your River Kwai Bridge
And the one at Thanh Hoa too.
We got ten seconds over that bridge,
Then into the mountain dew. (Chorus)

Uncle Ho holds all the cards, boys,
And he plays them with great joy.
Wonder how he liked that game of bridge
Up at old Hanoi? (Chorus)

Now we lost some friends up yonder
Due to SAMs and MIGs and flak,
But if Ho puts that damn bridge up,
Well, we'll all be going back. (Chorus)

For those who've gone before us
For those who've left our shore
I know we're not forgetting them
So let's sing it just once more! (Chorus, twice)

The time-honored right of servicemen to complain reached perhaps an all-time high in World War II. It almost developed into a science, with units pointing with pride to their champion bitcher.

In Vietnam, if the men who fought the war in the North had a right to complain, they also had reason. It was the war that wasn't a war. For a long time these men flew from bases in Thailand, bases that no one would identify or even admit were operational. When combat pay was authorized, the flyers were considered combat personnel. After all, they were flying against the most concentrated air-defense system ever developed.

But then it was discovered that Thailand was not really involved in the war so naturally these flyers weren't either. So long, combat pay! Then someone else decided that the 100-mission tour would not include any sorties against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Someone, somewhere, didn't think it was that rough. Maybe it wasn't! But compared to what? Route Package 6?

The song *One Hundred Missions* pretty much told it like it was, to the tune of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*. The terms "Iron Hands" and the "Weasels" refer to a little-known group of men who flew ahead of the strike forces. Their mission: kill the SAM sites. Think of a hot, humid night in Thailand. You can almost hear them singing in the hootches:

One hundred missions we have flown, Aha,
aha,
One hundred missions we have flown, Aha,
aha,
One hundred missions we have flown,
One hundred bridges we have blown,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

From one to one hundred we did count, Aha,
aha,
From one to one hundred we did count, Aha,
aha,
From one to one hundred we did count,
But now one-half or more don't count,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

They said they'd give us combat pay, Aha,
aha,
They said they'd give us combat pay, Aha,
aha,
They said they'd give us combat pay,
And then the bastards took it away,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

We're Iron Hands from Old Takhli, Aha, aha,
We're Iron Hands from Old Takhli, Aha, aha,
We're Iron Hands from Old Takhli,
Our hearts beat fast, we think we'll pee,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

The Weasels fly around alone, Aha, aha,
The Weasels fly around alone, Aha, aha,
The Weasels fly around alone,
With half a flight they head for home,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

The force rolls in amidst the flak, Aha, aha,
The force rolls in amidst the flak, Aha, aha,
The force rolls in amidst the flak,
One-half or more won't make it back,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

Not many will return alive, Aha, aha,
Not many will return alive, Aha, aha,
Not many will return alive
Who fly the bloody one-oh-five,
But you can't return till Lyndon gives the
word.

There are a lot of songs that express opinions on the conduct of the war—opinions that professional airmen would never voice in public. Let's look at a few lines from a song titled *Our Leaders*. (Tune: *Mariana*.)

Lt. Col. George L. Weiss, USAF (Ret.), was given a direct commission by the Air Force in 1950. During much of his career, he served throughout the world as press officer for TAC's Composite Air Strike Force (CASF). After a tour in Vietnam, Colonel Weiss was an information officer at Headquarters USAF until his retirement in 1970. He is now an editor of Armed Forces Journal.

The JCS are generals
And they're not always right.
Sometimes they have to think it over
Well into the night.

When they have a question
Or something they can't hack,
They have to leave the judgment to
That money-saving Mac.

They send us out in bunches
To bomb a bridge and die.
These tactics are for bombers.
Our leaders used to fly.

The bastards don't trust our Colonel
Up in Wing, and so I guess
We have to leave the thinking to
The wheels in JCS!

Another old-timer in the collection of fighter-pilot songs is the one that calls on everyone to "throw a nickle on the grass." Well, it was that for at least thirty years. World War II, Korea, the Cold War, Berlin, the Lebanon Crisis, Formosa, Cuba—fighter pilots gathered and sang dozens of variations of this all-time favorite. Only the chorus remained fairly recognizable. Here's how it went:

Oh, hallelujah, oh, hallelujah!
Throw a nickle on the grass,
Save a fighter pilot's ass.
Throw a nickle on the grass,
And you'll be saved.

Got a surprise for all you old nickle-tossers. Today, the Southeast Asia lads look to something more practical. If you were standing in the bar at a squadron party in Thailand tonight, you'd hear the old favorite happily shouted this way (leading off with the chorus):

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Here's a tanker full of gas
To save a fighter pilot's ass
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Put your gas hole on the boom
And you'll be saved.

I was cruising at six angels
In my Foxtrot one-oh-five,
Thinking about a young thing
Back in a Takhli dive,
When a sudden burst of ack-ack
Was all around the sky.
Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!
My tanks are running dry. (Chorus)

So I squawked my parrot Mayday
And called up GCI,
Asking for a tanker
To keep me in the sky.
"Well," the Airman Third controller
Said, "Please don't go away.
Let me call up Seventh
To see if it's OK." (Chorus)

Then a friendly tanker pilot
Called out, "Fighter jock, no sweat—

I've got half a jug of coffee
So I'm not Bingo yet.
If you get a vector to me,
I'll be glad to pass some gas.
Turn your twenty mike-mike off
And don't shoot up my ass." (Chorus)

It was really getting hairy
As I sped my old Thud south.
I could feel the cotton rising
All inside my mouth.
Then I saw the silver tanker
And gave a happy shout.
Then I saw the drogue behind
And started punching out.* (Final chorus)

There are no songs sung at Heartbreak Hotel, The Country Club, or the Hanoi Hilton. Seldom do the Thud and Phantom drivers there see each other. When they do, it's never for social purposes. It's for Communist propaganda. But there will be a song someday. The Red River Rats will get together and when they sing that POW song all the jocks, some wearing stars, some in civies, are going to stand and scream and shout because the song will tell it like it was. And if you weren't standing in their corner when they needed you, there will be a line in it just for you.

Until, then, let's remember that once before there were prisoners who survived combat and internment and sometime later found it possible to sing:

Thanks for the memories
Of flights to Germany,
Across the cold North Sea.
With blazing guns
We fought the Huns
For air supremacy—
How lucky we are!

Thanks for the memories
Of ME-109s,
Of flak guns on the Rhine.
They did their bit
And we were hit
And ended our good times—
We hated them so much!

We drifted out of formation
We jumped, and what a sensation
And now to sweat out the duration.
Our jobs are done,
We've had our fun.

So thanks for the memories
Of days we had to stay
In Stalag Luft 3A.
The cabbage stew,
Which had to do
Till Red Cross parcel day—
How thankful we are!

*Although the F-105s used in SEA were equipped for either boom or probe-and-drogue refueling, some of the newer pilots arriving in the theater in 1965 had received very little training in drogue refueling. This particular Thud driver must have been one of them.